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Drug Wars: The New Alliances Against Traffickers and Terrorists

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Following is an address by Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, before the Council on Foreign Relations, New York City, February 10, 1986.

The Council on Foreign Relations is a forum for the discussion of weighty matters, the serious business of foreign policy, global economics, military strategy, and national security. I would guess that few council meetings have been devoted to the subject I want to address today. The drug problem has long been thought to be a matter for the police or for the local TV news or Friday night melodramas.

I want to change that attitude, and I appreciate the opportunity you have given me to do so. For I believe that few issues we face in the areas of foreign policy and national security have a greater and more immediate relevance to the well-being of the American people than international narcotics. The sooner all of us who ponder foreign policy issues recognize the extreme threat posed by international narcotics trafficking to the health of our nation and its neighbors, the sooner will this danger to our families and our children be reduced and eliminated.

Not very long ago, the discussion of drug trafficking consisted mostly of finger pointing. We blamed Latin Americans for indifference to the production and movement of narcotics northward. And they pointed to the United States and its insatiable market as the cause of that traffic. Within our own government, different agencies belittled each other's efforts, and some even claimed that fighting narcotics would "degrade" their mission and should best be left to traditional local and Federal law enforcement officials, the "narcs."

There has been a dramatic change. There is a bit of the "narc" in all of us now—from presidents of Latin American democracies, to commanders of U.S. Navy destroyers in the Caribbean, to Assistant Secretaries of State for Inter-American Affairs. There is, of course, still plenty of blame to be laid. Before I finish tonight I will point my own finger at some specific targets, and I hope some of you will be uncomfortable for it. But a significant story of the 1980s in this hemisphere, ourselves very much included, has been the breaking down of old attitudes and jealousies, the upgrading of missions, and precedent-setting cooperation against the traffickers and their guerrilla allies and protectors.

In Washington, the level and productivity of joint narcotics control ventures among government agencies is making bureaucratic history. In exactly the same way, effective cooperation among the Andean countries of South America and Brazil is confounding historical judgments about narrow nationalism and the "traditional" role of the military and police in these countries. I don't know which is more surprising—State Department "narcs" working closely with Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) "diplomats" or joint Colombian/Peruvian military and police antidrug actions on their common border. I suspect that neither development has been given sufficient public airing.

The new antidrug alliances are a phenomenon almost as important in inter-American politics as the hemisphere's transition from despotism to democracy over the past 10 years. Moreover, sustaining democracy and combating the "narcoterrorist" threat are inextricably linked. That is our view, and it is the view of democratic leaders throughout the hemisphere.

How did this come about? It did not stem primarily from bureaucratic imperatives in Washington or diplomatic approaches in Lima or Bogota. And it did not result from any particular, persuasive public relations campaign. It happened, simply stated, when we discovered ourselves to be victims and began to fight back in self-defense. In effect, we began to see that the pernicious assault of drugs on society is deeply damaging to the security of our families and communities and that defending our national security has to include defending ourselves against drugs.

The Assault on Society

The scourge takes many forms. In northern South America, still the main route of cocaine traffic to the United States, there is a relatively new drug which some call the most damaging such

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substance on earth. In Colombia it is called "basuco"—from "base de coca." Basuco is a semirefined coca paste which, when smoked, delivers the "high" of cocaine—and with it the chemical poison of an incomplete refining process. The result is addiction plus the very high risk of severe, permanent brain damage. In one Bogota neighborhood alone, there are an estimated 7,000 juvenile basuco addicts.

Insidiously, the producers of basuco deliberately created a demand for this vicious product and priced it so that whole new segments of society—the young and the poor—could become drug consumers. Basuco has exploded the myth, fostered by traffickers, that the supply merely follows demand; that the traffic only exploits the rich, idle, and perverse gringos and Europeans. In Bolivia and Peru, these same deadly coca-paste cigarettes are known as "pitillos." Bolivian experts suggest a higher per capita incidence of addiction to such drugs in their nation than in the United States.

As the frightening fact emerged that large numbers of their own children were becoming regular users of this terrible and terrifyingly cheap product, authorities and parents in the Andes understood that passive acquiescence in a traffic destined to the distant United States in fact risked the health of their own societies. They have learned that drug-producing countries easily become drug-consuming nations. Something of the traffic always stays behind: this is not a Miami vice alone.

The shock of basuco, and similar revelations about other drugs, were among many over the last several years.

First, there was the economists' conclusion that the so-called economic benefits to producing and trafficking countries reach very few people and are far outweighed by the inflation and other distortions brought on by the traffickers and the money launderers. In Bolivia, for example, reputable, legitimate businessmen (some representing U.S. firms) are finding their backs to the wall, facing bankruptcy as a result of predatory pricing and marketing competition from new firms backed by narcodollar capital. Meanwhile, the construction of condominiums in south Florida does not benefit the Bolivian peasant.

Second, the enormous intimidating and corruptive power of the traffickers surfaced so blatantly that public and political opinion in country after country has recognized the direct menace to democracy itself. The 1984 drug mafia assassination of Colombian Justice Minister Lara and the kidnap-murder in 1985 of DEA agent Enrique Camarena in Mexico were only the most arrogant demonstrations of this subversion of government institutions.

Third, and related, is the mounting evidence of a deadly connection between narcotics traffickers and guerrilla terrorist groups. It is a link that multiplies the capabilities of each. Colombia provides the best examples: guerrilla groups—the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia], the M-19, and others—have been found protecting cocaine labs and landing strips and facilitating shipments. Last November, when the M-19 terrorists attacked the Supreme Court and murdered nearly half of its judges, their specific behavior—the judges they sought out first, the extradition documents they burned—convinced Colombian authorities that, whatever their so-called political goals, the guerrillas were also working directly for the traffickers. And on top of that, the fact that some of the weapons they used came from the Sandinistas highlights the immensely dangerous connection to international terrorism. Nor are we immune: here in the United States in October 1984, law enforcement agencies uncovered and foiled a rightwing Honduran coup plot financed by drug money.

Changes in Attitude

For all these reasons, the changes in attitude, commitment, and policy among Latin American countries have been profound. Territorial rivalries and nationalist tensions have not disappeared, but Colombia now actively works with Peru and with Ecuador and Venezuela in interdiction. A new regional narcotics telecommunications system will soon be operating in South America. It will connect for drug law enforcement purposes military and national police establishments which not long ago saw each other as potential enemies.

Successful aerial spraying of marijuana in Mexico, Panama, Belize, and Colombia has been followed by important experiments in aerial eradication of coca by the Colombian National Police. Colombia has extradited seven individuals, five of its own citizens, all accused of narcotics trafficking, to the United States. The international movement of chemicals used in the cocaine refining process has been severely restricted.

General awareness of the benefits of international cooperation to combat narcotics production and trafficking is increasing. The Organization of American States will hold a special conference in Rio, April 27-28. Many European countries are beginning to look into assisting eradication efforts in Latin America, as they realize that they, too, are targets of the traffickers.

Developments in the United States are running a parallel course. The mythology of cocaine as relatively safe, the only risk being arrest, has been exploded. Concerned Congressmen, like New York Representative Rangel, Chairman of the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, have led a determined and dedicated effort to educate all of us to the dangers of drug abuse and the necessity for international cooperation. First Lady Nancy Reagan has pitched in to help carry the message to the youth of this country. Americans are coming, if slowly, to realize that cocaine does lead to addiction: after five or so uses the odds shift heavily in that direction. The corruptive potential of drug trafficking is increasingly recognized as something more than prime time script material. And basuco, the deadly partially refined coca from South America, has begun to appear in the United States along with "crack," a more refined, but nearly as deadly, form of the drug.

American antinarcotics activity, both domestic and foreign, has increased rapidly. Perceived sometime rivals like DEA and Customs are collaborating as never before. Similarly, the extradition of accused drug traffickers is not a one-way transit to the United States—we have recently extradited two American citizens to Colombia as part of this effort.

A historic example of teaming-up in our own government is a current massive operation off our southern waters: under the general direction of Vice President Bush, the U.S. Government has undertaken interdiction operations of unprecedented scope cutting across traditional agency divisions. The Vice President's office has provided coordination to the intelligence and interdiction efforts of the Coast Guard, Navy, and Customs with the cooperation of the international community. The State Department, through our embassies in the region, handles the involvement of a number of foreign governments.

A new function has been added to the traditional tasks of Foreign Service officers. Five of our posts in Latin America and the Caribbean have something called Narcotics Assistance Units charged with administering important programs of assistance and cooperation in the countries where they operate.

These "narcodiplomats" are on the sharp edge of this critical warfare. They have been partly responsible for encouraging and helping to channel U.S. funds into the successes of Latin American governments I noted earlier. Some of them seem to be doing better in their liaison with difficult-to-deal-with ranking government officials than are their political and economic section counterparts.

One of my personal contributions to the war against illegal drugs will be to make sure that good "narcodiplomats" move up faster in the Foreign Service. The drug mafia and their guerrilla friends are shooting at these people. Few things that the State Department does contribute so directly to the U.S. national security and welfare than our coordinated war on the narcotics/terrorist combine.

The Continuing Threat

At the same time, we must be honest with ourselves. What we and many governments in the hemisphere are now doing is significant, but it does not mean that drug trafficking is being defeated. In fact, in the aggregate, we have not reduced the flow of cocaine to the United States at all. The price of the drug has gone down over the past few years in major American cities, indicating increased movement of supplies.

Enormous profits are creating sharp incentives for increases in coca acreage and for innovative production, smuggling, and marketing. The pattern of expanding cultivation is clear as one flies over the vast eastern slope of the Andes. Illicit plantings are shifted as eradication programs succeed. As Colombian interdiction, eradication, and extradition increases, the traffickers move their operations to neighboring countries. The traffickers constantly experiment with new chemistry and new smuggling routes. As our and other naval forces interdict drugs in the Caribbean, the traffic flows elsewhere. Cocaine increasingly is being transported through Mexico and across our land border. As old methods of hiding the white powder are unearthed by Customs, new, more sophisticated ways are developed. A recent cocaine shipment from Colombia arrived in a case of realistic plastic imitations of the ubiquitous yam.

Where does that place all of the increased cooperative efforts I have just described? It means that more, much more has to be done. But, at the very least, it also means that very few of the principal actors are now attempting to hide their own inaction by pointing the finger at others. Almost everyone is now in the act together. The experts in our agencies and in other countries are agreeing that interdiction, or eradication, or extradition, or the reduction of demand cannot work if attempted in isolation, one tactic at a time.

The problem is huge; it must be addressed across the board. The resources arrayed against our efforts are staggering. Cocaine is at least a $40-billion-dollar-a-year business. For obvious reasons, exact figures are elusive—it may be twice that. What is clear, is that everyone is affected, everyone is to blame, and everyone is responsible for action.

Shared Responsibilities

This brings me to some finger pointing of my own. Has the American system—and here I refer to more than this or that governmental agency—done its part as a whole? What of a large portion of the media which glamorizes succeeding generations of "designer drugs" (some might call basuco just that)? Or what about those who conclude, in frustration at the slow pace of progress, that the task is "impossible" and therefore not worth attempting?

How genuinely responsible, beyond the strict dictates of the law, are major American banks in making certain they are not involved in the "laundering" of drug money? How many banks represented in this room have been cited recently for failure to report cash transactions of over $10,000? The last list I saw included five banks just here in New York City. Do those bankers who turn a blind eye in order to turn a better profit have any idea what they are doing? To their country? To their communities? To their own children?

How many communities look only toward the fresh tax revenues they will receive (maybe) when the drug barons build mansions or buy condominiums by the beach? And how many lawyers, executives, media stars, and athletes still believe a little "coke" for "recreational use" is OK?

I may sound a little arrogant, but I feel that my colleagues in the State Department, in the uniformed services, and in the drug agencies are doing their part. And I believe that there is a great deal to praise in Central and South America and the Caribbean, where poor governments have made the critical turn against rich, powerful forces imbedded in their own histories and economies.

This commitment is evident in Bolivia, where the democratic government of South America's poorest country has taken initial steps to reduce the substantial cultivation of the coca leaf, a product with almost sacred dimensions through historic ties to the Incas. Just after New Year's Day, the 200 members of the country's only antinarcotics strike force were surrounded and threatened by as many as 17,000 angry peasants because they represented a renewed police presence in Bolivia's largest coca-growing region. The reason? The peasants were beginning to feel the economic effects of the government's assault on a crop for which there is no economic substitute. Incidentally, those 200 strike-force members are supposed to cover an area the size of France.

In less than 6 months in office, the democratic Government of Peru has launched three large-scale interdiction operations, seizing more than 13 metric tons of coca paste and destroying 69 clandestine airports. A major narcotics ring has been broken up and its "godfather" arrested, and 369 senior police officers have been forced into early retirement as part of a "moralization" campaign. Fifty-four percent more coca was eradicated in Peru in 1985 than in 1984.

Corruption and intimidation remain major problems. But, at the very least, most of these governments have stopped insisting that it is our problem and have begun to try to do something about this universal scourge. I believe they deserve more help from us and more private action on our own soil.

Next Steps

What kind of additional help do I think we should provide? One area which deserves to be considered is a major increase in the tools many of these countries require for drug enforcement and interdiction. I am not talking about jet fighters or aircraft carriers; but I am talking about more armored helicopters and troop-carrying aircraft. Why? Because when the police or special military units go after jungle labs today, they are likely to run into assault rifles and machineguns, not Saturday night specials. Better targeted U.S. assistance would serve U.S. national security, and it would, at the same time, demonstrate that we are listening to what the new, democratic leaders of Latin America are saying—with increasing frequency—about their real national security needs: less for military competition with their neighbors and more for defense against the trafficking and terrorizing enemy within.

Would this mean spending more? I'm not sure. American taxpayers now shell out over $1.5 billion a year, more or less evenly divided between enforcement on the one hand and treatment, prevention, and rehabilitation on the other. And of that amount, less than a $100 million is spent abroad. Those of you who are businessmen will know better than I the costs to your own operations of drug-using employees. Certainly, we could do more, much more, to stop the stuff before it reaches our shores.

Similarly, the ongoing debate in Washington about the proper mix of civilian and military assistance related to the drug war should be accelerated. The time has come—now that Latin America is 90% democratic—for our system to recognize that certain legal restrictions which emerged from another era no longer apply across the hemispheric board. If a national police, responsive to an elected democratic civilian government, can do the job best, then we must be able to allow our own agencies, civilian and military, to assist the police. And if, in a specific country, the military—under democratic civilian control—has the mandate, then that is where our aid should be directed.

I believe that recent history does justify more from us, both as a government and as a people. The statistics and the experiences of what drug abuse is doing to a generation and more of Americans (and Brazilians, Colombians, and Jamaicans) demands that we do more and that we end whatever indifference remains. Attacking the traffic in narcotics is as high a priority as we have in the U.S. Government. I have told my diplomats that, and the Navy is showing it by supporting the Coast Guard's mission.

Now it's the turn of the Council on Foreign Relations and of people like you. It is time to go beyond sitting in judgment on what bureaucrats and foreigners are doing. It is time to join the war against drugs. As Ecuador's president said, in somewhat more colorful terms, during a recent visit to a coca field to observe eradication: "Let's get rid of this garbage."

This is not just a health problem, not just a foreign aid problem, not just a police problem. It is a moral challenge and a national security matter. It threatens democracy in our hemisphere and children in our homes. Let us treat it with the seriousness it deserves. ■

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